

The Ugly Is Made Beautiful in Jesus Christ 6 Epiphany C

The Super Bowl is history, and some players have played their last game now that the 2006-2007 season is over.

A few years ago, Richard Justice, writing in the *Houston Chronicle* ("Life after football: Hello real world," January 31, 2004, 1B), explored the frightening statistics regarding the difficult transition period that most pro football players experience when they retire from the game.

- Sixty-five percent of NFL players leave the game with permanent injuries.
- One in four players reports financial difficulties in the first year after he retires.
- Of the NFL marriages that fail, 50 percent fail in the first year after the player leaves the game.
- The suicide rate for active and retired football players is six times greater than the national average.

And, listen to this one!

- Seventy-eight percent of NFL players are unemployed, bankrupt or divorced within two years after their last game.

These players are simple examples or reminders of how important it is to understand why we're here. Jesus cautions us that life is not about having all our wants met, but getting down to what truly matters in our life.

The world gives us the reality that there are really two types of people: the poor and the rich. Scriptures teach there is a balance to life and a balance to the disparity between rich and poor. In Jeremiah 17 we are reminded that all people whether they trust in humanity or in God, share a heart that is devious and that the LORD will test and search that heart according to its behavior. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul writes that some in the church say that Christ was not raised but the faith he preaches is a Christ who is the first fruits of the resurrection. Christians are to be pitied he says, if the only hope they have is in

this life. Christianity stands or falls on whether Jesus assumed a new bodily life after a brief bodily death.

This imbalance between rich and poor, faithful and unfaithful we are assured will be made right. The diseased, the troubled and the weak all sought to touch and be touched by Jesus. In Luke's version of the "Beatitudes" Jesus applies a principle "That the ugly and the beautiful of this life will stand on level ground."

Matthew's Beatitudes has Jesus speak only of the state of the "Blessed." It is directed to those who have suffered in this life and who have dared to trust God and his righteous justice. Luke on the other hand has Jesus speaking "blessings" on the poor, hungry and mournful and "woes" on the rich, the full and those whose life is nothing but laughter. Those who will rejoice are the ones who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because they stood on God's word. Those who will mourn will be the ones who spoke well of the Nay Sayers. You might say that Luke took the more inclusive approach. After all, God loves sinners of in which we all have a membership – and it costs!

There is a day of reckoning. How we live does make a difference and will be accounted just like the offerings are accounted every Sunday at Trinity's office. There is a balanced budget and what is not collected to meet that budget we have faith God is going to provide through you and me.

What a wonderful metaphor of this we find in the gospel's first verse. "Jesus came down with the twelve apostles, and stood on a level place..." Luke gives us a word picture as Jesus and the twelve, who will judge the nations, receives all of people on "a level place." That "level place" is Jesus platform of righteousness and justice. We can count on him to faithfully execute justice for all people based on the level of their faith. He does not promise "pie in the sky, by and by" but he does stand "on a level place" where we are measured not by what we had in this life but what we did with what we were given.

A faith piercing story is told by Will Willimon, in a chapel address called "Sin as a by product of worship." He tells the story of a friend of his who, while in seminary, served briefly as a chaplain in a state prison. He received a request from a father of a young man who was interned in the prison. The young man had committed a robbery in a little town and had been sentenced to many years in jail. The son was angry, embittered.

The convict's father came each week to visit him, but the youth

steadfastly refused to see him.

The chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the young man to see his father. But the young prisoner refused to reconsider.

Despite his refusal, the father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled across the state in the hope of seeing his son.

Every week. And every week it became the young chaplain's difficult task to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad?" He then had to bear word of the refusal to the waiting father.

The father would thank the chaplain, gather his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip back home.

One day, after telling the father the same thing that his son would not meet with him the chaplain said, "No one would do what you are doing. Your son is an embittered, defiant young man. Go back home and get on with your life. No one would put up with this kind of rejection, week after week. Nobody would do this."

The father said, "He has put up with it for centuries," and he picked up his meager belongings and headed out.

And the young chaplain literally fell to his knees at this vision of the righteousness of God.

Let us pray: All Merciful One, all we like sheep have gone astray. Every one of us has turned to his own way. We have fallen short of your glory. Take what is ugly in our lives and make it beautiful. Fill us with your sweet, sweet Spirit. Amen.